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AUTHOR Schaefer, Barbara E.
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ABSTRACT

The presentation of the book "Animal Farm" by George Orwell to sophomores at East Orange Catholic High School, New Jersey, as a "political document" is discussed. Through research, panel discussions and voluntary comments, the students studied the book in depth comparing it to the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky in Soviet Russia. Although some students confronted this book for the second time, getting to the roots of it presented more of a challenge during the two and a half week period, and encouraged further research into history and politics. (LS)

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THE ROOTS OF ANIMAL FARM

Barbara E. Schaefer
East Orange Catholic High School
East Orange, N.J.
1970

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Orwell's Animal Farm is usually introduced at the junior high school level. Recently, the editor of a national women's magazine noted that even her eight-year-old daughter was reading it. Wistfully, the editor added "I wonder if she'll understand the part about 'some animals are more equal than others'."

As a parable or fairy story (to use Orwell's own description), Animal Farm can be presented to younger students. They'll like it just because it's about animals. However, at East Orange Catholic, a revised curriculum had suggested Animal Farm for sophomores. When I announced this to my two sophomore classes, I was greeted with such remarks as "Oh, I read that in eighth grade" and "Yeah, that was cute." Sophomores can be pretty blasé. How was I to interest them in a work that was for many of them "second time round," even a childhood souvenir?

In the preface of our edition, a Signet Classic, I found a cue, a quote from Orwell himself:

> Animal Farm was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole.

Politics, specifically the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky in Soviet Russia, are the roots of Animal Farm. Read as a parable, the book is a potent argument against totalitarianism in general-- but read as a parallel to historical events, it acquires even more veracity and force. Instead of child's play, it becomes challenging adult material, in a sense a mystery story for which only thorough research can provide the key. This was how I decided to present Animal Farm to my sophomores, some of whom were already taking Modern European History.

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From the first, I decided that this would not be one-way communication. East Orange Catholic believes in and encourages independent study. It would be up to the students to "decode" Orwell, to dig up those historical roots and fit the

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various pieces together.

In our opening discussion of Animal Farm, I pointed out that Orwell was inspired by actual events in Soviet Russia. Calling for volunteers, I assigned reports on both Trotsky and Stalin. East Orange Catholic students are usually eager for extra credit so at least twelve students in each class responded. One girl produced a 24-page report in which she developed the parallels between Stalin and Napoleon, Trotsky and Snowball. The research reports were presented to the class, sparking further discussion.

For two successive weeks, I also assigned panels on Animal Farm. These five-member panels were chosen from a list made up at the start of the term. I had collected the students' Reading Comprehension scores, then grouped them accordingly so all panel members would be at approximately the same level. To spur the panels, I would give them five preliminary questions such as:

1. What is the meaning of totalitarianism?
2. Who or what does Mr. Jones represent?
3. What is the meaning of Old Major's dream?
4. Contrast the characters of Napoleon and Snowball.
5. How do the pigs gradually assert their priority?

These panels ranged far and wide. The initial research reports stimulated all sorts of analogies. Old Major was seen as a composite of Marx and Lenin; one student noted that Major's scull had been put on display just as Lenin's body had become an object of public reverence. Snowball's "vivacious" personality was compared to Trotsky's; student research revealed that Trotsky had been Lenin's first choice as his heir. Napoleon gradually emerged as a Stalinist figure; his vicious pups grew into the secret police-- their attacks on the weaker animals corresponded to the bloody purges of the 1930's. Mr. Jones obviously represented the old regime and Moses, his raven, was a symbol of Orthodox religion-- at first banned in the U.S.S.R. but later to some extent tolerated.

Once started, the parallels came thick and fast. Napoleon's rapprochement

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with the humans, his negotiations with Frederick, recalled the Nazi-Russian peace pact. As with Frederick's forged bank notes, there was Hitler's historical betrayal.

Animalism, like Communism, had been a visionary dream betrayed and corrupted by greed and the lust for power. The students could see the relationship between the projected windmill and Stalin's five-year plans. Poor Boxer, sacrificed to the Glue Boiler, became a type of the loyal socialist worker who never reaped his reward. Squealer, of course, symbolized propaganda. Craftily, he manipulated the sheep and rewrote the Commandments, finally reducing them to one, "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others." When Napoleon at last sits down with his human neighbors, the students could see the parallel to Stalin's alliance with capitalist powers during World War II.

Throughout this Animal Farm unit (which lasted about two-and-a-half weeks), the students took the initiative in tracing Orwell's allegory. They also absorbed a lot of recent history, following Trotsky to his assassination in Mexico-- and Stalin in his rise to the most decorated hero of the U.S.S.R. Fortunately, while the unit was in progress, East Orange Catholic had a visiting college professor lecture on the history of Communism. Though it was not required, quite a few of my sophomores attended this lecture. Some of them indicated that they enjoyed it more because they felt knowledgeable about the subject.

It is sometimes argued that English teachers should concentrate on teaching values rather than literary technics. In presenting Animal Farm as a frankly political document, I think I was being true to Orwell's own values. It was not his intent that Animal Farm be read in a vacuum; in 1945 he aimed at an audience which had lived through much of this history. To offer the book as an Aesop-like exercise seems to be short-changing one of the most incisive writers of our time. Through research, panel discussions, and voluntary comments, my sophomores studied Animal Farm in depth and they experienced the joy of discovery. "So that's what it means!" is just another way of describing insight, which is what most English teachers are striving to achieve.

As for literary values, I also taught Animal Farm as an example of satire, a genre we would explore much more thoroughly in a later unit. My students realized the book was a "mock" to use their own term-- but having absorbed so much background, they know what the mockery was all about.

What is most important, however, is that they enjoyed the process-- even those sophomores who were confronting Animal Farm "the second time round." This time they got to the roots of it-- in fact and substance. The fairy story had become adult entertainment, instructive and thought-provoking, which is just what Orwell meant it to be.

As for that women's magazine editor, I hope that someday her eight-year-old daughter will take a second look at Animal Farm, too.

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